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A MODERN STANDARD OF FEMININE BEAUTY

BY ALEXANDER BLACK

With original illustrations by Commere-Paton.

To the Philistine the artist is the delineator, the imitator of beauty. To the philosopher in art he is the inventor of beauty. "Each age," says the late Theodore Child, in the course of one of those exquisite monographs that illustrate as well as discuss the beautiful, "has its inventors of beauty or its strongly personal spirits, and in each age the imitators and the artists of feebler personality find themselves embarrassed in the choice of an idol."

In no phase of art do we find more interesting evidences of the perpetual change in ideas of beauty than in expressions of the beauty of women. In every age art has written its highest and its most definite thoughts concerning beauty in representations of woman's face and woman's form. Poetry, painting, sculpture, each in its own way, has furnished illustration of this fact.

We may find, as Mr. Finck suggests in his "Romantic Love and Personal Beauty," that the ideal of beauty set up by the æsthetic Greeks, two thousand years ago, corresponds remarkably with that of modern artistic minds. But this ideal has been subjected to definite modifications, and in the interval there have been wide oscillations in the pendulum of taste.

If the subject were to be considered seriously and fully we should be obliged to take into account the fact that there has been a definite change in the characteristics of feminine beauty in the progress of civilization; that the painter of to-day has before him, in the flesh, types of beauty different from those that stood before the Attic school. So that we cannot easily compare the degree of the creative that appears in Praxiteles's work, for example, with the degree of the creative that appears in that of Michel Angelo. We did not require the assurance of Plato to understand that the Greek painters and sculptors idealized in their translations from nature, and no person of observation is likely to fall into the error of thinking that the surviving examples of Greek sculpture represent forms of beauty that actually existed in Greece or anywhere else. The beautiful woman of to-day is more beautiful than the beautiful woman of Plato's day, because, by the interesting processes of natural selection, she



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cannot help being so. That our sculptured representations of beauty are not correspondingly higher (if this be true) may call up a multitude of speculations and explanations.

Painting shows a more obvious gain in the expression of feminine beauty, with an increase of truth to life, as each century has added its genius in the perfection of draughtsmanship; and it is through the medium of painting rather than through that of sculpture that we obtain an opportunity to study changes in ideals of feminine beauty.

An examination of these changes has already formed the theme for more than one volume, and the theme must be an interesting one to the end of time. Incidentally, it may be noted that the modern taste is for a slenderer figure than even the mediæval painters very often choose to draw. The Venus of Melos is an obsolete ideal. That sort of matronly figure is not to the liking of any of the modern schools, which could not, indeed, continue to represent that type without chastising the modern types in flesh and blood. The modern woman not only has different general proportions, but the artist, at least, wishes her to be a more lithe and delicate creature. Mme. Paton's idyllic shepherdess is typical of the time. How fragile Rubens would have thought this charming figure!

In "Hosnah" Mme. Paton presents a type that in this era may be called stalwart, and "The Bather" might be selected to represent a transitional "middle-weight." In the treatment of the nude this artist displays much dexterity as well as refinement. Her women are thoroughly feminine, and her brush readily lends itself to the romantic.

In this paradoxical era, in which the world seems to grow radical and prudish at the same time, when thought is free, but beauty is not always its own excuse for



A BATHER

being, it is interesting to speculate on the contrasting conditions under which the ancient Greek artist expresses the beauty of women, as compared with the artist of later times. The modern artist may more readily find a pretty woman, but the beauty of the feminine figure is not so familiar as it was to the sculptor of Greece. Not that we are without certain public exhibitions of the approximate nude—we must not forget the bathing resort and the burlesque—but the conditions in general are unfavorable to that dispassionate familiarity with the human form which gave such power to the Grecian masters.

It will be admitted, however, that the relative unfamiliarity of the nude in life has not made the idealizations of the artist less fascinating to the æsthetic taste ; and if there is any truth in the theory that life imitates art, a theory ingeniously advocated by Mr. Oscar Wilde in his essay on "The Decay of Lying," the artist must continue to hold important relations to the beauty of women, since he not only is translating that beauty but furnishing nature with new moulds into which to pour the spirit of loveliness.

A lady who was going into raptures over one of Whistler's pictures remarked to the artist that she had seen a landscape in the course of a drive on the day previous that closely resembled the picture. "Yes," said Whistler, "nature is creeping up."



HOSNAH